DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 182 PS 014 239

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TITLE Planning for Quality Parks and Play Spaces in High Density Areas.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Canadian Parks and Recreation Conference (Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, August 16, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Design Requirements; Innovation; Local Legislation; *Park Design; *Playgrounds; Space; Time
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario

ABSTRACT

Discussed are limits and constraints associated with the design of small urban parks located in such a way as to optimize use. Factors affecting design strategies and solutions are listed, and four major design strategies are examined. Specifically, strategies involve space, time, innovative designs, and municipal laws and by-laws. (RH)

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Planning for Quality Parks and Play Spaces in High Density Areas

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Paper presented to the Canadian Parks and Recreation Conference,
16 August, 1983, Saint John, New Brunswick.

Have you ever wondered, as Jane Jacob does, "Why are there so often no people where parks are, and no parks where people are?" It is a sad commentary on our times that our young people feel it is cool to "hang out" on Yonge Street, but not in the parks or recreational spaces of Toronto. Our urban land has become too expensive to plan the old fashioned green square with a statue of a man on a horse in the middle. The impacts of this situation are manifold: (a) city dwellers have no quiet retreats or fun spots within walking distance (b) empty parks represent wasted investments, missed opportunities (c) the lingering unfulfilled need for parks and recreational spaces drive up prices or properties bordering attractive parks or recreation spaces. (d) Families with young children flee to the suburbs in search of an environment that can provide what the city cannot - trees to climb, quiet streets and large back yard gardens. What can be done to re-introduce nature into our cities, and people into our parks? Before we can plan realistic strategies, we must understand the problem, the limits and constraint factors.

Factors affecting design strategies and design solutions

1. By the year 2000, fully 75% of the population will be living in urban situations whether they are cities or small towns. Our present resources are simply not adequate.

2. Our current strategies are neither successful nor people pleasing. We continue to plunk down cookie cutter tot lots and neighbourhood parks. The facilities lack diversity when they are planned for generalized patronage. Our parks cannot be all things for all people.

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3. Urban land has become scarce and expensive. The costs of buying the land depletes municipal resources, while cities grow larger, and more crowded. Demand far exceeds supply potential.

4. Large parks and regional parks cannot serve all the needs of the urban population. Most park users walk from their homes, or pause enroute to another activity. Not everyone is prepared to drive to a park, and if everyone did, it would be impossible to provide adequate parking.

5. The urban cosmopolitan population has become more sophisticated and diverse in its expectations. It simply is not possible to provide for all needs (wading pools, jogging trails, picnic areas, children's play spaces) in one space. We must be more cost-efficient in our strategies.

6. Competing demands for resources have placed tremendous strains on the municipal purse. Budgets for the development of parks, for the maintenance of spaces and for recreation professionals are under constant attack. Our parks must be designed so that people not only use them, but also appropriate them and care for them, minimizing the need for large maintenance budgets and recreational personnel.

Design strategies

The design strategies must address everyone of these factors while being practical and cost effective. There are four major strategies:

- strategies involving space
- strategies involving time
- strategies involving innovative design
- strategies involving municipal laws and by-laws.

Let us examine them one by one.

Strategies involving space

Using existing spaces better:

The "conserver" strategy would involve making an inventory of existing parks and recreational spaces, and exploiting them to their full potential. Make spaces multi-use. Use them intensively. For example, at St. Anne de Bellevue near Montreal, picnickers crowd to the strip park along the river. It could be better developed. We could make an existing pedestrian route into an english garden path, a waterfront into a quiet seating area.

Think small

. Parks do not have to be large. One of the most popular parks in New York is Paley Park - only 1/10 of an acre. In fact, a city lot 20 x 100 feet, in the middle of the block is a perfect solution. It is easily accessible to walkers, and the neighbourhood absorbs it as their own.

How small can parks be? I am sure you have heard of pocket parks, but there can even be "patch parks" - a small oasis of green with a pleasant sitting area near a bus stop.

New spaces and innovative uses for space

. These are spaces that have not been tapped, but which with proper design, can be just as popular with people as a traditional park. Develop a roof deck over a parking garage as in Ottawa, an atrium, or a court yard, such as Robson Square and the Provincial court in Vancouver, or the space adjoining a public building, such as the Pigeonnière in Quebec City, develop an alley or a walkway such as the promenade in Halifax.

Strategies involving time

- Time sharing

  Simply stated, this implies using spaces designed for other uses, for recreation at specified time periods, coinciding with periods of low primary use. The best example is a play street. In the middle of the day when there is little traffic, the street is closed off and is used for children's play.

- Temporary parks or portable parks

  Several large American cities, particularly New York, have had a successful program renting empty lots and setting up a dismantalable swimming pool during the summer months.

- Happenings

  These are scheduled activities that regularly take place at appointed sites which may be used for other purposes. Examples are a play bus which has a scheduled morning in a city square, an evening concert in a park, entertainers at city functions or on street corners.

Strategies involving innovative designs

- Dispersion of activities

  Careful design can ensure that a variety of activities are provided for even if no central park or recreational space is available. One urban city block could have, a wadable fountain, a sitting ledge along a street facing the landscaped yard of a public building, a graffitti board, a green space for sunbathers, picnickers, and practicers of tai-chi, and a small meandering pedestrian, jogger, bicycle pathway.

- Multiple uses

  Many innovative designs provide a new face with the changing seasons. A hardsurface catchment basin, when dry is a roller skate/skateboard area; when wet, a wading/boat sailing/splashing area, and in winter performs as a local skating pond. A school/communal playground in Manhattan has an amphitheatre which converts into a pool during the summer months.

- Overlap or layering

  Where space is tight, design elements can be combined or stacked. For example, the architects have hidden the toilets inside a concrete hill. At the same time creating slopes for slides and other games. It is possible to create variety by changes in topography, allowing some facilities to overlap or even to be stacked.

- Changing traditional use

  We are used to seeing a street broadened, with the loss of one sidewalk. Why not a change benefitting park/recreational uses? The sidewalk may be widened, narrowing the street, creating a pedestrian space near a street with reduced traffic. Or a divided road could lose its median, and the space could be added to the sidewalk. This larger sidewalk could hold a play area, a sidewalk café, or parkette with game tables. Or the traffic could be completely redirected, so that the street is a pedestrian mall, or changed to a small linear park.

- Indoor parks

  Though cities lack open space, they often have large unused indoor spaces, such as warehouses, industrial buildings, or railroad stations. One such building has been converted to an adventure playground, another into a community recreation centre. This is a particularly appropriate solution for our northern climate, where such a space could be designed for use all year round.

Strategies involving municipal laws and by-laws

- Upgrading the requirement for recreational space for developments

  Most municipals require the consecration of 5 to 10% of the site to recreational purposes. By-laws could be strengthened with qualitative requirements, providing ideas for design to get away from the monotonous replication of swing, slide and teeter-totter playgrounds. The open space zoning provisions of New York City are a good model, dealing with such issues as seating, trees and landscaping, access to the disabled, lighting, etc.

- Incentives

  New York launched an innovative incentive program in 1961 to ensure that urban developers include ground level green spaces among the skyscrapers. The city provides incentive bonuses to builders who provide plazas. The bylaw allows builders to add 10 square feet of commercial floor space over and above the amount normally permitted by zoning, per each square foot of plaza. In 1972, New York City was pleased to note that this successful program had resulted in about 20 acres of the worlds most expensive real estate serving as public open space. The plaza at the Seagram building often has 150 people at lunch time, an enviable record of park use.

Conclusion

Urbanization trends threaten to severely deplete the open space and recreation resources of our cities, if we take no action. But we still have time, if we marshall our resources, plan our strategies and design cost effective solutions. It should not be necessary to flee the city for contact with nature and for recreation. Rather we should be able to add attractive parks, and diverse recreational opportunities to the multiple attractions of city life.

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